

Plain Talking

James 1:19-21

There are times when I feel hesitant even to comment upon or offer any exposition for a particular verse in the Bible, because the verse itself is already so clear that anything I say might only serve to make it less clear. This morning is in one of those occasions.

We have before us a verse which really needs no exposition, no explanation. I can read that verse and you will immediately know what it means. And yet, I dare say that not one of us can fully claim to be what James will describe just a few verses later—“doers of the word.” Not one of us can read this plain and clear verse and honestly respond, “That is exactly what I always do.” So here’s the verse.

v.19 “So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.”

As the ESV puts it, “quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.”

As we begin today, let me emphasize that these words are written to Christians! James addresses his whole book to Christians, identifying them with the language carried over from the Old Testament people of God, by addressing his readers as “the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad.” Here he addresses them personally, “my beloved brethren.” He is not condemning them, nor even necessarily accusing them. He addresses them as Christians, in the most intimate of family relationships. But he is clearly exhorting them! With,

I. PLAIN TALKING WISDOM.

v.19

The first application of that ought to be the emphasis upon listening to God. Learn to listen to God. And how does God speak? Through your feelings? Through your emotions or through your own subjective experiences? The answer is no, and while I don’t want to deny the on-going reality of the subjective work of God the Holy Spirit today, the words “I feel that…” and “Thus says the Lord” are two very different and often contradictory statements. The authority of God speaking does not rest with what you feel. Or for that matter, what you even think. “The supreme judge by which [of the truth of all things] can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.”

And so the answer to any particular question or concern is not, “How do I feel about it,” but rather, “What has God written!” So learn to listen to God speaking in Scripture. That means you have to read what he has written! And while you are reading it, you have to have this attitude that you recognize that God is speaking to you.

Listening means that you are receiving what is being said, not rebelling against it or even chafing under it. Listening implies a position of inferiority, the roll of submission. It precludes any exercise of authority. It means that you must be docile, teachable. For God is speaking. And that means that you must conform what you believe and how you live your lives to what God has said.

And it requires a response. Thus, James says, “Be doers of the word.”

Yet, James doesn’t limit this injunction to be quick to listen simply to the need to listen to God. I believe the application of this verse is much broader, to include the exhortation to,

A. Learn to listen to others.

And that takes effort. You have to give your attention to the other person. You have to consider that person more important than yourself. You have to consider his or her words more important than your own. Listening is a crucial aspect of loving your neighbor as yourself.

You have to listen in order to understand. One of the great faults of many in our day is the unwillingness to even try to understand what other people are saying! There are many causes. Often, the cause is pride. You know more than someone else, at least in your own opinion. You think yourself better than someone else, or better educated. More intelligent. You have all the answers, for you see everything clearly through your own eyes. And this tendency is a great danger to the unity and peace of the church of Jesus Christ today.

So evaluate yourself. When others speak to you, do you immediately respond with all your own answers and with your own advice? Or are you quick to listen? Do you make every effort to understand what someone else is saying to you, even when on the surface you immediately disagree with them? Are you willing to listen, even at length, to those with whom you might disagree?

James' injunction doesn't mean you can never speak. Indeed, at times Scripture calls us to speak in rebuke and correction. But that ought never to come quickly. Not before the process of listening is completed.

Sometimes the cause of a lack of listening is simply carelessness, the bad habit of simply not wanting to make the effort. After all, listening takes time and energy, and you might be short on both.

So please evaluate yourselves this morning in all these things, that you might listen, and hear--and respond, to what James says so plainly. Be quick to listen. And to do that, there is the obvious reality that you have to keep your own mouth shut. So you must,

B. Learn to control what you say.

Be slow to speak. As I just said, that doesn't mean you never speak! But it does mean exactly what it says. Listen first. Be slow to speak. Don't ever speak carelessly.

Sadly, some people simply enjoy hearing themselves talk. Do you know people like that? They never seem to keep quiet. And there are people who always respond in almost any conversation with immediate advice and opinion. Quite frankly, I don't say much to those kinds of people. I don't go to them for help or counsel, because I know that all I will receive is their own opinion. The people from whom I cherish counsel are those interested in first listening to me. Those who are slow to speak are the ones worth listening to.

That is certainly that model I wish to exemplify in my own pastoral labors. I hope that if I err in counseling settings, it is on the side of listening too long, too patiently. There is a place to give counsel and admonition, but that place is at after the patient exercise of listening. There are many scripture passages to reinforce this. For example,

Mat. 12:36 "But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. 37 "For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

Or how about these pithy warnings in the proverbs,

Prov. 17:28 "Even a fool is counted wise when he holds his peace; When he shuts his lips, he is considered perceptive."

Prov. 10:19 “In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, But he who restrains his lips is wise.”

And James is no fool, for he knows just how difficult this is.

James 3:2 “For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. 3 Indeed, we put bits in horses’ mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. 4 Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. 5 Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! 6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. 7 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. 8 But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.”

It is good for you to know what sort of reputation you have among others, of whether you are considered to be one who is quick to listen and slow to speak. The best indicator of that reputation is simply whether or not people come to you and trust you enough to seek your advice and counsel.

So think of your own heart, and think of ways in which you might need to repent of your own foolishness, the ways in which you are not quick to listen nor slow to speak. With one very obvious and necessary consequence,

C. Learn to control your anger.

This is an especially heinous consequence of being slow to listen and quick to speak. The expression of anger, words of anger. You simply must be able to control your temper!

Prov. 14:17 “A quick-tempered man acts foolishly, And a man of wicked intentions is hated.”

And on the positive side,

Prov. 16:32 “He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, And he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.”

This is not optional! This is not one of those gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to some and not to others. This is an obvious and essential aspect of your sanctification. Self-control in the area of anger. So, if you speak words that are not spoken with complete self-control, and if the moving impulse of your words are anger, you have sinned! So these things are so very much related. Be quick to listen. Be slow to speak. And be slow to anger.

James gives us good reasons for that, in explaining,

II. THE DANGER OF ANGER.

v.20

Notice how James describes it, the wrath of man. Wrath that has its origin in the nature of man, by implication, the sinful nature of man. So it is that James is considering here,

A. The sinfulness of anger.

Anger, itself, is not sinful. God is angry, Scripture tells us often. For example,

Ps. 7:11 “God is a just judge, And God is angry with the wicked every day.”

And Paul has that intriguing exhortation in,

Eph. 4:26 “Be angry, and do not sin”: do not let the sun go down on your wrath.”

He quotes Psalm 4, and he does not say, “Do not be angry.” That is not the command of Scripture. Rather, “Be angry, and do not sin.” In other words, be careful. Very, very careful. Anger is like dynamite. There is nothing inherently sinful in dynamite. It is actually quite helpful and useful when used correctly. But always, always it must be handled with utmost care and therefore always under control.

Paul gives one example of how to avoid sin when there is anger, namely, to seek to resolve that anger as soon as possible. “Do not let the sun go down on your wrath.” I use that verse in marriage counseling, as an encouragement for husbands and wives to be sure that they never stay angry at one another. Whenever there is conflict which provokes anger, you need to seek to resolve it. And be reconciled.

The wrath of man, however, often takes on a life of its own. And how devastating it is when it ushers in violence and uncontrolled confrontation. So Christian maturity, as measured by the requirements for those who would be ordained to office of elder or deacon in the church, requires among other things, that a man be “temperate,” “not violent...but gentle.” He must not be “self-willed, not quick-tempered, ... not violent,” but “sober-minded” and “self-controlled.” I left out many things from those lists in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, but just think about how many of them make reference to this necessity of controlling anger so that it not become sinful.

Similarly,

Prov. 14:29 “He who is slow to wrath has great understanding, But he who is impulsive exalts folly.”

Impulsive means quick-tempered! And the results of such sinful anger are obvious.

B. The results of sinful anger.

Namely, that growth in righteousness is stunted! Christian maturity is stifled. As I read from Ephesians, the warning is that if you do let the sun go down on your anger, and don’t resolve it, you “give place to the devil.” You give the devil a foothold! As James puts it,

v.20

I believe the reference there is to what is produced in us, the righteousness of God that is to be implanted in us, worked in us. The reference is to sanctification. Thus, you will never grow sufficiently in that sanctification, you will be unable to progress very far in your Christian maturity, unless your anger is brought under control.

And so we hear Jesus applying the sixth commandment with such intensity,

Mat. 5:21 “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’ 22 “But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire.”

So what should you do if you find yourself in this struggle? First and foremost, confess it! Repent of sinful anger as sin. Don’t excuse it, simply as part of your personality. Don’t ignore it, as if it doesn’t really exist. If anger is an enemy within your heart, then declare war upon it, to put it to death.

And make it a matter of prayer to seek God’s help, for you will not accomplish the victory in this battle without that help. Ask those around you to pray for you in this struggle, too, by

confessing your sins to one another! Especially those whom you have sinned against.

If you often have sinful anger toward your husband or your wife, confess it and in seeking forgiveness ask for the help of their prayers! If you have sinned against your children, confess that to them as well and seek their forgiveness. The same for friends, neighbors, and people in the workplace. “Do not let the sun go down on your wrath.”

That being said, it might be wise to seek to understand the cause of your anger. Not so that you can blame everything that is wrong with you on some traumatic childhood experience, but so that you can understand your own heart. You might well have long-standing anger toward someone in your past, and that anger does nothing but fester into the deep root of bitterness.

Bitterness is a deadly poison! We are strongly warned about it in,

Hebrews 12:15 “...lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled.”

I’ve known people who haven’t ever been able to identify that root within their own heart, but the defilement in their lives was obvious. I’ve known children whom I would simply classify as “angry,” and that’s a disastrous experience for their souls. I likewise have known adults who are characterized by this bitter root of anger, too, and it tends to cloud everything else in their lives.

So examine your own heart this morning. Examine it deeply and rigorously, lest there be “any root of bitterness springing up [to] cause trouble.” And recognize the unresolvable conflict that exists between the working of righteousness in your life and the existence of ongoing and unresolved anger.

It may be that you need to forgive those who have sinned against you. It may be that you need to confront them to seek that reconciliation. It may also be that you need to stay away from some people, according to the wisdom of,

Prov. 22:24 “Make no friendship with an angry man, And with a furious man do not go, 25 Lest you learn his ways And set a snare for your soul.”

Thus the plain talking of James,

v.19 “...let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; 20 for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.”

Let me conclude then with the positive alternative,

III. AN ALTERNATIVE LIFESTYLE.

Alternative here in the sense of an alternative to the life of bitterness and anger we have just studied. What is the alternative?

v.21

Again, let me emphasize. That exhortation is given to Christians. Therefore I proclaim to you as Christians. This is to be a general description of your life, the duties and obligations of the Christian faith summarized so very succinctly. The whole of that duty is perhaps put under this one great heading,

A. Putting off what is evil.

“Lay aside.” That means to take off, like a dirty garment. The idea is of a spiritual housecleaning. This is common language in the New Testament, and it refers to our responsibilities in sanctification not God’s work in justification. This is the result and necessary consequence of that justification. For example, the more comprehensive description of,

Eph. 4:20 “But you have not so learned Christ, 21 if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: 22 that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, 23 and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, 24 and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness. 25 Therefore, putting away lying, “Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor,” for we are members of one another. 26 “Be angry, and do not sin”: do not let the sun go down on your wrath, 27 nor give place to the devil. 28 Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need. 29 Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. 30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. 32 And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you.”

And, 1 Peter 2:1 “Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, 2 as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, 3 if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious.”

So take off your old clothes of that old way of life that was yours before you were saved by grace through faith. What James describes as “all filthiness and overflow of wickedness.” Those are very graphic words. Filthiness is a good translation of the Greek. The idea is that sin is well symbolized by the stench of an overflowing sewer. There is an obvious sickening influence, it stinks, in the worst way imaginable. That’s exactly the image of what sin is like.

Now, when you think about that way, it really is repulsive. So it is to be in our spiritual lives. We should have this very urgent objective. Beloved, “lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness.”

And let it be from the heart, from the gentleness and meekness of your heart. As James puts it, v.21b “...and receive with meekness the implanted word.”

Receive with meekness! Oh, the great value of,

B. The heart of meekness.

Meekness is the opposite of rebelliousness. It stands opposite the word translated “wrath.” Meekness is really quite the opposite of self-assertiveness. It is the willingness not to demand your own rights. “Meekness is the humble and gentle attitude which expresses itself in a patient submissiveness to offense, free from malice and desire for revenge.”

Again, to keep these plain words of James very plain, let me challenge you to consider your own heart. Evaluate your own heart according to this scale, on this side is rebelliousness and anger. On this side is meekness. The process of Christian living and spiritual maturity means that walk from this side, which comes naturally within the fallen nature of man, over to this side, which is the evidence of the work of God within you.

Beloved, godliness means that you meekly submit to the authority of God. It means that you meekly, without rebellion, receive the word of God that has been implanted in you by virtue of your salvation! And notice what James has to say about,

C. The power of God’s word.

It is the word “which is able to save you.”

Don't be confused by the pointedness of these exhortations today. I intend them to be pointed, for indeed, if they weren't I wouldn't be faithfully preaching this particular text. This text is pointed. It is very personal, and you should feel the heat, so to speak!

But with all that, to be faithful to the inspired words and wisdom of James, we come full circle in this study to realize that it is the power of God in his word that is able to save your souls. It is not YOUR power in putting off filthiness and the overflow of wickedness that will save your soul. Indeed, as a non-Christian, you couldn't accomplish that even if you tried.

But as a Christian, within whose heart God has written his word and his law, the key to all of this is the meekness to receive that Word knowing that the power is in the word!

Heb. 4:12 "For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."

So it is by means of the Word by which you are saved--referring to the whole process of salvation, past, present and future. It is by means of the Word by which you are able to "lay aside all filthiness." It is by means of that living and powerful word that your stubborn and rebellious heart can be softened and made meek.

And so I hope that I have left the plain talking of James to be very plain. "Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath...Lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls."